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*ISSUES CONCERNING HISTORY TEACHING AND EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY
IN HUNGARY*

Abstract

This study presents the characteristics of history teaching in Hungary over the past decades with a special view to the aspect of education for democracy. In this context, it touches on the culture of memory, various perceptions of history, and the complexity of historical literacy. It addresses the new tendencies of international history teaching, changing teaching and learning strategies and methods. It presents the declining role of the frequently modified central curricula in Hungary as well as educators' perspectives on the continuously changing systems of requirements. The paper also points out that civic "knowledge" consists rather of acquired attitudes and the practice of certain skills. The study shows how education for democracy plays out in everyday practice in the school, with the support of data from research conducted using surveys. In that context, it highlights the kinds of problems that can be detected among students in the area of education for democracy and citizenship, and draws connections between the emergence of those problems and public policy. It calls attention to the need to remedy unfavorable trends, in which societal self-reflection, history teaching that adopts a complex social sciences perspective, the democratic atmosphere of schools, educators' professional autonomy and the independent voice of students could play a big role.

Keywords: historical literacy, professional autonomy, civic competencies, active citizenship, education for democracy, student voice

At an earlier conference, I called the instruction of history in Hungary surrealistic, as, both in the area of theory and practice, the educational characteristics of various historical planes of time (e.g. monopolistic and multiperspective approaches, education for obedience of the subordinate and for active citizenship, content-based and competency-based instruction) slip over each other, and these often-contradictory phenomena function in parallel in everyday practice.

This paper presents the characteristics of history teaching in Hungary from the perspective of conditions perceived as surreal, with particular attention to the point of view of education for democracy. The theoretical background and research data are presented in the work of mine that follow (Kaposi 2020., F.Dárdai & Kaposi 2021., Kaposi & Kalocsai 2019).

That about which we know little

Students' knowledge of history. In the past 30 years, there has been no such comprehensive and continuous collection of data, based on scientific standards, that would have asked students about their interest in history, their understanding of concepts related to the topic at hand, connections between cause and effect on multiple levels, and their nuanced understanding of historical persons and phenomena. It follows that our knowledge of students' preparedness (of their knowledge, skills and attitudes) is lacking. Although local and regional evaluations, some small, some larger, have taken place, none were repeated, and all of them generally dealt with one sub-issue or another. The only evaluation that can be seen as continuous is the history school-leaving examination, but that presents us only with statistical data. Around 70,000 students take the examination each year, and 8-9% of those picked the so-called advanced level test. At the intermediate level, the average grade is 3.5, while it is 70%, on average, at the advanced level.

Teachers' work in the classroom. Data are also few and far between with a view to everyday classroom practices, because, here too, the last big evaluation at our disposal is more than 20 years old. It is known, for example that the new school-leaving examination, introduced in 2005, as a strong outcome requirement, was capable of exercising its impact all the way to the classroom level. In the work of teachers, practices limited to the transfer of information were reduced, while application of source- and activity-centered methods increased. At the same time, the so-called pedagogical culture shift failed to take hold in everyday practice. Frontal, dictation-based methods remain the dominant presence in classrooms, as shown by small-scale evaluations in recent years. During classroom periods, the teacher presentation and explanation takes 15-20 minutes, while the illustration takes 5-10 minutes, meaning the teacher's activities dominate two-thirds of the classroom period. Data show there is more than a 44% gap between the enjoyable, attention-grabbing and motivating teaching that students expect and the everyday practice of conducting lessons. This shows that teaching based on conventional teacher presentation and dictation, and the question-and-answer method are practiced side by side, simultaneously, with activity- and experience-centered, project-based, and digital, often in networks, educational practices in everyday

history teaching. Evaluations have also shown that teachers, among them history teachers, experience the new pedagogical challenges springing from changes to the teacher's role – and from the spread of digitalization – as a devaluation, because they believe their knowledge acquired till now is no longer necessary. The role of facilitator does not appear attractive, they are not prepared for it, nor are they convinced that it will be more effective from the point of view of preparing their students.

What we pay attention to

Trends in history teaching in the past decades have been influenced rather by Hungarian historiography and reflection on international history didactics as well as curricula. Historiography identified orientation points for the selection of teaching content, the transference of new research results and the emergence of new emphasis on content, while international history didactics functioned as a yardstick with regard to innovative pedagogical approaches, teaching strategies and methods.

The transformation of historiography. The study of history experienced the change of system in the 1990s as a liberation, because it was freed from the compulsory ideological ballasts required in Marxist historiography and fundamentally reinterpreted the history of Hungary in the second half of the 20th century. The perspective of Europe became an important aspect that meant, on one hand, the new legitimization of classical ideological-social and economic traditions (e.g. Judeo-Christian teachings, the principle of separation of powers, private ownership) and, on the other hand, a declaration of belonging to a geographic, economic and cultural area.

A number of earlier silenced topics, such as the operation of the communist state security, the issue of victims, the development of the situation of churches during the period of dictatorship or the role of the civil sphere in the everyday life under the dictatorship became the focus of research. Unfortunately, the reinterpretations of the past appeared more than once as a simple change of signs – what was earlier considered positive became negative, and vice versa – instead of trying to present the complex connections of the past with new approaches. Since the 2000s, the preoccupation with the past has become part of a political battlefield to a significant extent, thus the interpretation of a historical event or phenomenon has become, willingly or unwillingly, a part of symbolic politicization and the politics of memory at the time. The ongoing political fight for the past – as it affected not only content but also the frameworks for interpretation – naturally made the orientation situation for history teachers even more difficult.

Changes to the concepts of knowledge and learning. The technological, cultural and social changes unfolding on an increasingly broader scale have resulted in a significant transformation of earlier ideas about knowledge. The necessity of acquiring easily transferable, generic competences gained greater traction. Those competences and competence elements that are the foundations for competitive knowledge, that can meet the challenges of the 21st century, have been recorded in several ways. These are the main skills summarized in various studies and international documents: the so-called basic skills (writing, reading comprehension, arithmetic) and the so-called transversal and profession-specific skills.

The world of work has expressed the skills considered to be most competitive in the framework of the so-called 4C model: critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication. In the acquisition of these competences, a greater role is ascribed to both knowledge acquired in the framework of non-formal learning and informal learning, the wide-spread use of ICT devices and the growing popularity of knowledge-sharing platforms and learning networks. All of this has necessitated the emergence of learning technologies that place a premium on the individual needs of each student, reinforcing the need for learning personalization and knowledge sharing in networks.

International trends in history teaching. New trends – in many cases related and frequently in conflict or opposed to one another – can be identified in the area of international history teaching in the past decades. All of these are related to the challenges of the global world, the advance of the knowledge economy and the paradigm of life-long learning. They connect to society's politics of memory, to the transformation of historiography, to changes to the perception of knowledge and to the rapid rise of digitalization.

In more and more countries, it has become generally accepted that the stress of history teaching should be placed on history key competences (Stradling, 2001), and that a key aim of learning in school ought to be establishing a kind of adaptive interpretative framework that allows students to understand new events and processes. The view has been adopted in international discourse that the conventional model of history teaching does not sufficiently equip students with the knowledge to face the great global challenges of our age in the context of the diversity and complexity of today's democratic society (Nordgren 2021). Today, investigations of components of historical knowledge have become the focal point of history didactics (Lévesque, Croteau, 2020). It is also acknowledged that learning history is not only about cognitive sphere, analytical approaches, but also concerns the indispensable development of affective areas, too, as it is through these that social norms and moral relationships can be presented and democratic attitudes can take shape

(Chapman, 2021). The so-called European horizon has gained new meaning and context, too, (Vajda 2020) as the attitudes conveyed in the subject of history play an important role in sustaining democratic systems as well as in shaping community identity.

What we know a lot about

Content requirements in Hungary. If we examine the changing National Core Curricula (1995, 2003, 2007, 2012, 2020) and especially the school-leaving examination requirements (2005, 2015, 2021), we can establish that, on the whole - even if often amid contradictions -, the intent to establish competence development and life-long learning abilities as well as to implement a multiperspective approach and learner-centered learning-teaching strategy was the focus of regulatory processes. The mostly centrally-controlled and -regulated attempts to modernize did contribute to changes to the theory and practice of history teaching in schools, but fell short of a deep and far-reaching change of approach. The assessment of centralized efforts to reform – the continuously swinging regulatory pendulum – does indeed contain contradictions. The impact on each other of regulatory changes was of a degree in inverse proportion to the speed at which they were drafted: their adoption in everyday practice was limited and they were not included in lesson plans, becoming rather declarations of education policy. In no case did the changes produce in any systemic or radical results, or any tangible improvement in quality. A full change of approach was made difficult by the contradictions of the way of thinking of public policy, the uncertainty stemming from the continuously changing directions of education policy and the resulting loose ends of modernization and implementation processes.

A review of the process of content regulation of history teaching in Hungary shows that a dilemma, with roots in the change of system, became the focus of discourse: how and with what measure should commitments related to public life and an approach concentrating on society at present take a place next to the conventional culture-centered (e.g. scientific and neutral) approaches of the subject of history. The context of the debate is shaped, on the one hand, by the tradition, since curricula were first regulated in Hungary, of the subject of history offering the most emphatic opportunity for education for citizenship, and on the other hand, by the definitive role played by history teaching in the shaping of national identity over more than a century, a function maintained after the change of system and Hungary's accession to the European Union, too (HALÁSZ, 2005). It should be noted that while shaping the consciousness of national identity may

be the main goal of Hungarian history teaching, establishing a feeling of belonging to Europe is also important.

A lesson may be highlighted among those learned from the process of curricula regulation: that the degree of effectiveness of continuously changing (state) central regulation is low without widescale implementation and lacking an authentic and functioning system of evaluation. This is especially true if the process is undertaken overlooking scientific norms and without the involvement of those affected. Successful reforms require seeking consensus on many sides, broad professional openness and autonomy, and drawing on local innovative experience as well as the learning and knowledge-sharing abilities of the institutional communities involved in the change.

Questions on education for democracy

Data and results from a survey. If we look at content regulation in Hungary from the point of view of education for democracy over the past 25 years, we see that requirements – independent of the courses education policy has taken – put faith in democracy and so-called education for active citizenship and conform with international trends.

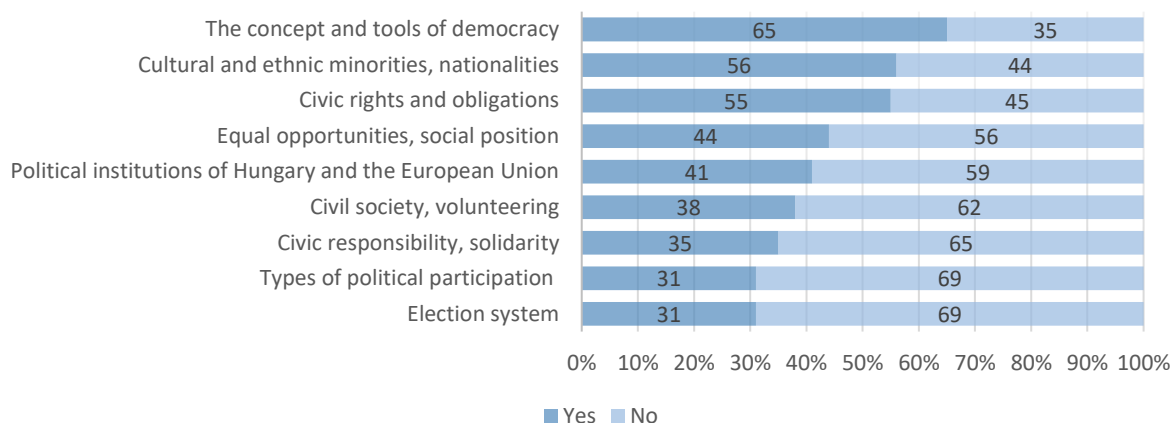
In the spring of 2018, we gauged in an open, online survey – in the framework of a representative sample – the opinions of students between the ages of 13 and 16 on education for citizenship/democracy underway in schools as well as the opportunity they have to become involved in matters of public affairs. The students' survey was completed by close to 900 young people.

The data show that schools' curricular program for education for citizenship and democracy is mainly present integrated into the subject of history and takes place, more or less, in that framework. Among the recommended topics in the curriculum, the greatest stress is placed on getting to know the operation of the system of political institutions (e.g. election system, political participation – see: Figure 1).

The ranking of the topics, or at least the content stressed in classroom processing is generally accepted by students, even though there is some contradiction with the topics they indicated as important and worth covering in their answers (e.g. topics related to social position, social equality, social responsibility, solidarity, and citizens' rights and responsibilities). This would indicate that students know the most important ethical principles of a functioning democratic society, even though they consider the principles themselves as more important than the tools necessary to apply

them, the assurance of a chance for political participation or an understanding of how the election system works. Or they do not believe in applying these in practice on the basis of their experience.

Figure 1: Did you have any subjects in which the following topics were covered? (N=899, %)



The students' answers to questions concerning the opportunities in school for education for citizenship attest, on the one hand, to their knowledge of conventions – preparation in school must contribute to education for citizenship (65%), and our schools are equipped for this task – and, on the other hand, a lack of understanding and passiveness with regard to public affairs and social solidarity. A relative majority (36%) of respondents answered 'I don't know' to the question of how schools can meaningfully contribute to education for democracy. So-called community service and school volunteering, which demands personal activity, has been relegated to the background, and only invitations of politicians and decision-makers to visit the school have a lower level of approval. (The latter could be interpreted as an assessment of the credibility of figures in public life – see: Figure 2).

An examination of students' opportunities to be informed about public affairs shows a particular mix of being sheltered, isolation, disinterest, indifference and loss of hope. About two-thirds of students basically have no interest in public affairs or political issues. They not only are disinterested in politics, but also confess to not understanding topics related to public life (Figure 3).

Figure 2: How do you think schools can best contribute to educating students for civic responsibility and active citizenship? (N=889, %)

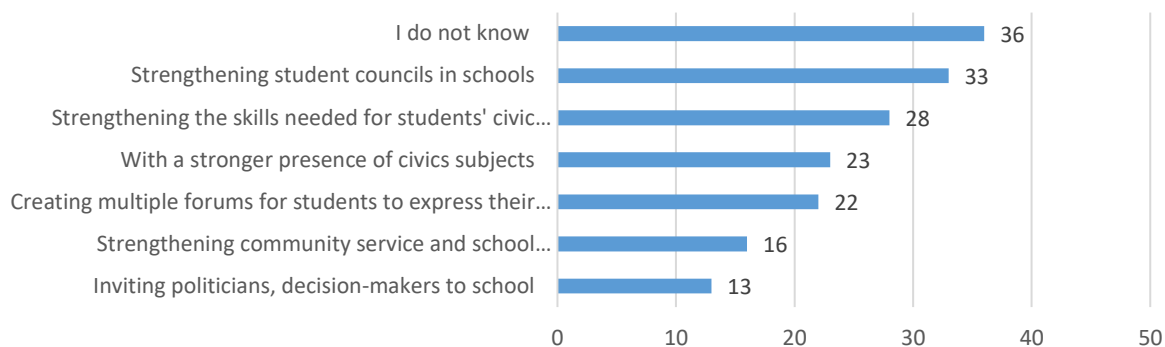
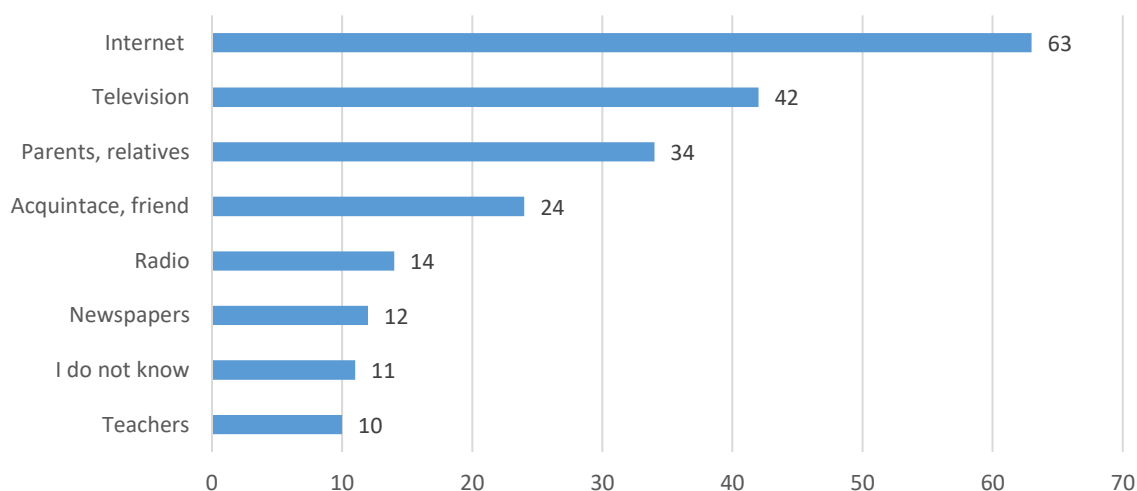


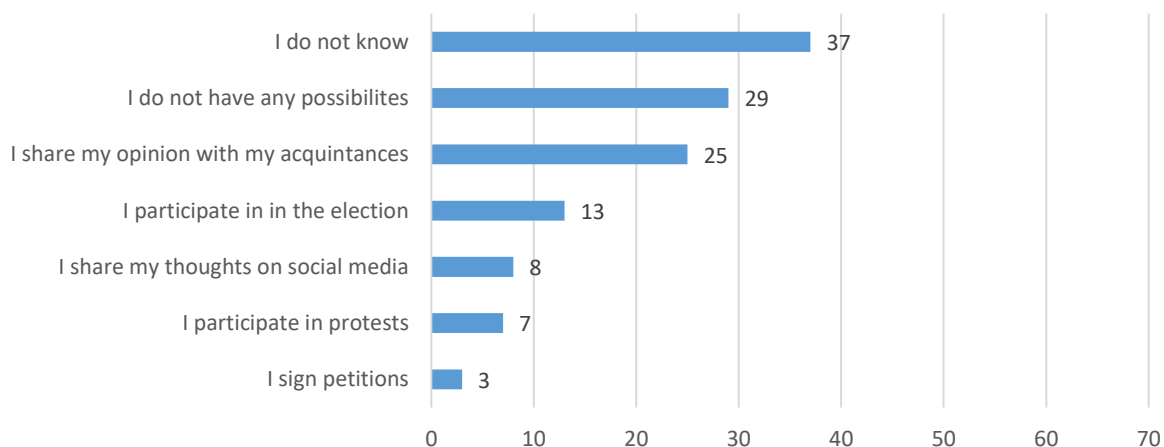
Figure 3: Where do you most often get information about public affairs? (N=889, %)



Almost 60% have nothing to say if political issues are brought up. Most get information about public life from the internet and a smaller number from the television. Only about 25% of the age group are informed by their peers, even though among 13- to 16-year-olds, the age group's example-setting and socializing function is of important significance. Of greater concern appears to be the small proportion (10%) of information related to public life that comes from teachers.

The relative majority (37%) of students could not (or did not want to?) answer the question about opportunities to have a say in public affairs, validate their interests or affect change (Figure 4), and a further 29% thought they had no opportunity for this. One-fourth of the respondents believe sharing their opinions with friends is an effective tool for having a say in public affairs, while just 13% said the same for voting and only 3% for signing a petition. Knowing how students can assert their interests and express their opinions is one of the pillars of education for democracy. That is why we considered it indispensable to explore whether students are aware of the tools with which they may have a voice in public affairs and can achieve change (Figure 4).

Figure 4: What kind of possibilities are available for you to be involved with public affairs? (N=889, %)



It is a telling result that almost 40% of the students could not answer that question, and close to 30% thought they had no chance to assert their interests. It also gives reason for concern that although thinking as a community and broad-scale cooperation are one of the definitive elements of democracy, only one-quarter of respondents considered sharing opinions with their peers an effective means for having a voice in public affairs, while 13% said the same for voting and just 3% for signing a petition. Asked which of those means they thought was the most effective, around 40% could not answer, while 14% said they have no chance to assert their interest or affect change.

The picture that emerges from the answers to questions related to public affairs is even more disheartening than the answers to the questions on life within schools. The answers show that instead of educating for conscious civic behavior (attitude), schools train students for (public) political disinterest, social indifference and apathy. Not only are students unaware of their political opportunities, they really don't want to find out; as adults, they want only to exercise their political

rights formally, similar to the practice they got to know in schools. This produces a particular subject-like behavior of which the natural consequence is the entrenchment of the powers that be on society and the emptying of democratic frameworks.

The answers, mainly from primary school students, confirm that curricular materials (Csapó, 2000) as well as the atmosphere, microenvironment and space to take action – contrary to the stated goals – do not instill a desire for activity in public life, and two-thirds of teenage students have essentially given up on becoming adults who are active citizens interested in public affairs.

The survey also shows that the approaches and system of requirements in the curriculum are overridden by the school's "veiled curriculum" which does not promote self-conscious active participation in public affairs in cooperation and solidarity with peers, but prefers rather isolation, passiveness in public life and the advancement of individual interests (Fülöp 2009).

The picture revealed can be traced back to a number of reasons on different levels and of varying significance. Certainly, students' perception of public life and their social well-being play a role, as does a decline in the commitment of the majority of society's members to a functioning democratic order. Among these reasons must also be mentioned the changes the scholastic world has undergone in the past 25 years, changes which show a continuous weakening of the legal scope of power schools and teachers have to make decisions. First, the role of the teaching staff became a formality with the selection of school heads, then schools' autonomy in planning the local curriculum was reduced, and finally the restructuring of the system in which schools are managed – and measures related to this – practically depleted entirely communities of teachers' competency to make decisions. All of this resulted in a devaluation of teachers' function as mentors and practically forced on them the role of taskmaster. It is difficult to educate an active, self-conscious and free, but responsible citizen while in the role of taskmaster. This is why it is an unavoidable and urgent task to restore the prestige of the teacher's profession as well as professional autonomy over the functioning of schools.

Summary

Long-term socio-political goals (national and European identity, social solidarity, commitment to democracy), the changing culture of remembrance, diverse historiography, and the changed perception of knowledge require a complex approach to history teaching, one that is part of education for active citizenship and democracy, and that holds the complex aim of developing historical literacy. The inner world of the school must be shaped in such a way that it is suitable for

the development of active civic competence and the everyday practice of education for democracy, because the attitudes that can be formed within this framework can be the pillars of the strengthening of domestic citizenship and social solidarity.

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